English. There was even a Cornish person in the mix. We asked the question. Someone said, 'I wouldn't like to repeat such things in a church.' We laughed, but we said, 'Try.' Try because it's better to name the things we hold against each other for all the truthing, birthing, dying, changing energies that are needed. What is not remembered is repeated, Freud said, so we remembered hatreds and pains. And there were many. Our language was taken. My son was murdered. Our place was terrorized. Our reputation was ridiculed. You discover new things when you name your hatreds of peoples to people who are part of those peoples.

Thus far, the book of Ruth is presenting the relationships of Israelite and Moabite territories through the characters of Ruth and Naomi. If the title and unfolding of the book were unknown, one might wonder who is going to take the stage in the subsequent chapters. But as the title implies, it is Ruth – the Moabite from Moab – whose body and story and actions are central. In the dramatic storytelling that unfolds, it is easy to forget that this story is telling more than the story of individual border-crossing women. In a time of judging judges, someone has chosen to write a story where a woman's courage is the thing that returns a people to themselves.

The book is implying that Ruth might be in the image of a true judge, a true leader. Having had judges from across the twelve tribes, now a writer proposes that a displaced foreign widowed woman who crossed a border with her bereft mother-in-law is a judge; and she rules not by enunciations but by embodying *chesed*. It is she who – in her subsequent bravery, survival and encounters – brings about a change in the people who will eventually count her as one of their own. She, who is not one of them, turned to join Naomi as she returned home, and Ruth, in her turn, turns a people to the best of themselves.

3

Addressing Stereotypes

GLENN JORDAN

A relief from violence

Though set in the time of the judges, the story of Ruth is an oasis of calm in the hostility of the period. The book of Judges is set in a time of lawlessness and violence; indeed, the opening verse sets the tone when the people ask the Lord to identify the ones who would lead their fight against the Canaanites (Judg. 1.1). By the end of verse 4 in chapter 1, 10,000 men have been killed and the king of the Canaanites has had his thumbs and big toes removed (v. 6). Presumably this was to prevent him from wielding a sword or running into battle any time in the future, rendering the warrior dependent on others as an invalid. It's an early example of the principle of an eye for an eye, recognized as a punishment from God for the prior cruelty of Adoni-bezek, the king in question, who had inflicted the same punishment on rulers he had earlier defeated (1.7).

There is no let-up in the brutality of Judges; indeed, it gets worse as the book progresses. It lays the blame squarely on the generation of people who followed Joshua and those who had personally experienced the early conquest of the land, who are described as a people who neither knew the Lord nor what he had done for Israel (2.10). What follows is a repeated cycle of apostasy, followed by oppression, followed by the rise of a successful military leader who frees them from their enemies, followed by a period of peace, followed by apostasy again. And again. And again. The stories are fierce, frequently brutish and inhuman; Ehud buries a knife in the fat of a king's belly and walks calmly away (3.21–23); Jael drives a tent-peg through the temple of Sisera and pins him to the ground with it (4.21); Gideon tortures 77 men of Succoth by tearing their flesh with thorns and briers (8.16); Jephthah rashly makes a vow to the Lord in order to secure victory, and ends up sacrificing his only child, his young daughter (11.30–39); an unnamed Levite dismembers his unnamed concubine after she had been raped and raises and army to avenge her by sending her body parts all around the country (19.29–30). By the end of this relentless tale of horror and conflict the tribes have turned in on themselves and the book ends with the weary description that this was a time when 'all the people did what was right in their own eyes' (21.25).

The book of Ruth appears as a brief interlude between tales of war and empire building, offering us respite in a story of love and loyalty. It also offers more than that.

Here we should take a pause to note the differences in canonical order between the Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible. In the Jewish Bible, known as the *Tanakh*, the book of Ruth is part of the *Ketuvim* or Writings, accompanying the other four scrolls of the *Megilloth*, namely Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther. These five books, which are scattered in the Christian Bible, are given a prominence in the *Tanakh* because of their liturgical importance for the Jewish holidays. But in the Christian Bible the book of Ruth is tucked in between the book of Judges and 1 Samuel, probably because it is set there chronologically and also because it introduces David, the major character of I and II Samuel.

For Christian readers, therefore, what we encounter in the story of Ruth is not a continuation of the savagery of Judges but a book standing in gentle contrast to offer us relief from its ferocity. But by its end it goes further and Ruth offers us an alternative path to the aggression and toxic masculinity of the prior book. That the story is one that spotlights for us the place of a foreigner among the people of Israel should also halt us in our tracks, particularly after all the stories of aggression against foreigners as enemies.

Not much has changed

In truth, though, the reader is not completely done with stories of pain and dread. The opening line of the book of Ruth sets us within a context of violence ('In the days when the judges ruled') and of famine ('there was a famine in the land', Ruth 1.1). The cyclical violence of the time period and the impact of famine means life is precarious and unpredictable. There is an incredible drama behind the matter-of-fact statement that a man from Bethlehem, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a time in the country of Moab (1.1). For instance, how long did it take and how hungry did they have to be before they took the decision to become refugees? It appears that we can't turn the page quite so easily on the trauma of what has gone before. Ongoing cycles of conflict and war affect not just human lives but the health of the very land on which we live and depend.

Right from the opening lines of this story we are being set up to expect something strange and unusual. There is a famine in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means 'House of Bread'. If even the house of bread can experience a famine then what, if anything, can be relied on? This is a truth behind any war or famine which causes mass movement of populations. All this detail is given to us before the people concerned are named. It is perhaps a hint that this particular family are only representative of a whole community impacted by the food shortages. This family may be named but they do not represent in themselves the full measure of distress. And so in just the opening two verses we are introduced to a population who have crossed a river and a border to live in the land of Moab because of a famine. Actually, living in Moab is mentioned twice in the first two verses of the book.

Very quickly we find that the displacement across national borders is but one of the problems this family faces. Following the flight to Moab, Elimelech dies. Was it the exertion of the journey? The impact of war? The stress of the decision? The loss of hope? Who knows. Once again the writer states it in a matter-of-fact way and we are given no details; perhaps we are being left to imagine it for ourselves. The reader is then told that the two boys marry two Moabite women, who are named as Orpah and Ruth. This may seem like a tiny bright spot in the gloom of the story so far, but not really. To the original hearers of this story, while marriage in more favourable circumstances might be a joyful thing, marriage in the foreign land to which you have fled because of famine at home, and to Moabite women, is scandalous. And at the third mention of Moab in four verses we are forced to take note.

Israel has a history with Moab and it's not a pretty one. The artist behind this tale chooses Moab for very deliberate reasons. The text reminds us many times that Ruth is a woman from Moab (1.4, 22; 2.2, 6, 10, 21; 4.5, 10). There is also a certain amount of implied scandal in the fact that

Elimelech has fled with his family to escape the famine. Elimelech's name can mean 'God is my King' or alternatively, 'May kingship come my way', suggesting he is a man of substance, and we could perhaps assume that some resources were required simply to make the journey. In some streams of Jewish tradition, however, his reputation is cast in shadow because he did not stay to share what he had with those who were in need in his hometown. That he flees to Moab is of immense significance because in Hebrew folklore Moab was stereotyped as a place lacking in hospitality, and with some justification.

There is a memory preserved in the words of the Torah from another time of hunger and distress. In Numbers 22, the Israelites, recently freed from Egypt, are travelling through the wilderness on the way to the land of promise and they camp in the land of Moab. There is a reference in Deuteronomy 23.4 to a request made by the people to the Moabites for bread and water. The king of the Moabites, Balak, terrified by the number of people he would be required to supply and aware of their supposed reputation for 'licking up everything around them' (Num. 22.4), refuses their request for aid and shelter. Balak even hires a man to pronounce curses on them as he expels them from his land.

For contemporary readers of the book of Ruth this subtext may lie deeply hidden, but for those to whom the story was first told it would be obvious and cogent. The prejudgement of the original hearers is that in a time of hunger no sensible person in Judah looks to their neighbour Moab for help, for memory of famine, and particularly memory of treatment at the hands of a neighbouring nation who could help but didn't, is not easily forgotten, indeed can last for centuries. To make the connection to today, to a great extent, relationships between Britain and Ireland, and particularly between

England and Ireland, are still impacted by what happened during the Irish potato famine of 1845–9.

In 1845 the potato crop failed, falling victim to a blight that had made its way across Europe in the preceding years. It was the first year of what has become known as the Great Famine, or *an Gorta Mór*, the great hunger. By 1849 a million people had died, a million had emigrated and almost two million refugees roamed the land in search of food. These years began a century of emigration and have entered the folk memory of Ireland, shaping its demographics to such an extent that the population of Ireland still has not returned to pre-famine numbers. The blight had a devastating impact on the Irish people because the poor of the land were so dependent on the potato as their staple food. Exports of other foodstuffs from Ireland, including potatoes, continued right throughout the famine years. It is said, for instance, that exports of all livestock from Ireland to England increased during the famine, except for pigs, although exports of ham and bacon did increase. *An Gorta Mór* was the result of deliberate economic and political policy decisions in Westminster.

The already strained relationship with the British Crown also worsened during these years, sectarian and ethnic tensions were stirred and the increasing diaspora, particularly in the United States, helped seed the growing threat of violence against British rule in Ireland. Stories survive of Protestant clergy establishing soup kitchens to feed those displaced from the land, who were mostly Catholic. In some cases, food was only provided on the condition that they converted to Protestantism, and those who did became known as 'Soupers', or those who 'took the soup'. The term continues to live on in the vernacular for someone who is disloyal or who changes allegiance.

All this is to say that being turned away during hungry

times is not an experience easily forgotten or laid aside. Antagonism towards the Moabites has a lasting, generational sting, so much so in fact that it was enshrined in the Law of Moses. In Deuteronomy 23 the Law states that an Egyptian, whose nation had enslaved Israel for centuries, could be forgiven and the third generation of their children could be considered one of the people of God (Deut. 23.7–8). Moabites, however, were altogether different. They should never, ever be admitted to the people of God, not even if over ten generations they prove themselves faithful. The clear reason given is because when the Israelites were hungry and thirsty the Moabites did not meet that need with bread and water (Deut. 23.3–4).

So when a story opens with a famine and a flight to Moab, then the original audience is primed for the same response. It stirs the ancient antipathy that lies only barely below the surface of polite human interaction during the days when things could be considered stable. The storyteller knows that the old stereotypes of mean and tight-fisted Moabites could be relied on to anticipate a certain unfolding of the story, for only a fool would flee to Moab during a great hunger. Everyone thinks they know how this story will end.

This sense of inevitability is heightened by a second detail in the opening paragraph of the narrative. After Elimelech's tragic death, Naomi foolishly, in the opinion of the original receivers perhaps, allows her two sons to marry Moabite women. Once again there is a familiar trope being pursued here. The tradition says that Moabite women are famously unreliable. This trope is buried deep in the Torah, in Numbers 25, where a story is told of sexually voracious Moabite women who lead poor innocent Israelite men astray. The account tells that ultimately 24,000 people died in a plague that afflicted the people because of the Lord's anger at their sin with these women. The text is unambiguous and goes on to say that the Moabite women, with whom the men had had illicit sex, also enticed these men into worshipping foreign gods.

If fleeing Bethlehem in a famine to go to Moab was one foolish act, it is compounded by this second. Marrying these boys to Moabite women can only end in heartbreak because – in the stereotypes of the story-world being explored – there is no way these scheming, manipulative Moabite women can remain faithful. Sure enough, death comes. And once again the storyteller can anticipate a predictable response: marry a Moabite woman and have your heart broken, at best.

And now Naomi is left without husband or sons, and everyone knows how the rest of this story will unfold.

On the back foot

What is astonishing about the narrative is that all this drama occurs in just the opening five verses. Famine, flight, death, marriages and more deaths; this is more than enough drama for several volumes, and yet the storyteller seems anxious to move through it all with some pace, as if it is the backdrop to what follows. And of course it is. The hearer, or reader, has been set up to expect a certain outcome to the search for hospitality in Moab and the all-too-human desire for companionship with Moabite women, but what follows in the rest of the story defies every stereotype these people, presumably Israelites or Judahites, have of Moabites. Indeed, it may even be that the whole purpose of the book is to unpick the ancient stereotypes of Moabites so deeply woven into the fabric of history, tradition and experience of the people of Judah. Such a self-examination preserved in sacred text is a wondrous call: so often in contemporary politics, we see that

voices of self-examination are derided as being unpatriotic. In the Hebrew Bible, self-examination through stories that upset stereotypes is praised as the practice of virtue.

The book of Ruth begins a process of challenging stereotypes by inviting the hearer or reader to consider the possibility of a new story in the relationship between these peoples. In the beginning, beleaguered and embittered Bethlehemites in the face of a famine might perceive Moab as the proper place for mean, tight-fisted Elimelech, and that his children deserve Moabite women. But as the story proceeds, the reader must face the uncomfortable prospect that Moab welcomes the family, and the widow Naomi finds a lasting home there for at least ten years (Ruth 1.4). Her sons also find wives, who continue to care for their mother-in-law even after the deaths of their husbands, when tradition would dictate that their marriage contracts had ended. By not leaving Naomi when they were entitled to and, by implication, not demanding back the dowry their fathers had paid, which they were also entitled to do, they are acting as if their marriage contracts were still in effect.

Naomi has to plead with them to leave her and only then does Orpah turn around and go home. Ruth, however, professes deep loyalty and commitment to her widowed mother-in-law in language that remains profoundly moving even today (1.16–17). Nobody in the orbit of this story would have expected this outcome. Hospitable Moabites didn't exist. Faithful and good Moabite women were unknown, but here the audience was been invited to consider the possibility that their inherited assumptions might be wrong and that change was possible.

The practice of stereotyping

We stereotype a people group when we apply to them a fixed and generalized set of beliefs about them. In some ways it seems inevitable in that it enables us to respond quickly to certain situations because we are able to apply the benefit of select prior experience. Where stereotyping becomes dangerous is when we ignore differences between individuals in that people group. Stereotypes simplify our social world and reduce the amount of data we have to process about our social interactions. It is easier to say that all Moabites lack generosity, or all British people want to dominate Irish people, or all Mexicans want to take advantage of American prosperity, rather than deal with the complexity of the individual standing before us. In stereotyping, we infer that that individual has the characteristics we already assumed all members of their group have. Negative stereotyping leads us into prejudice and assumptions about intention; *we* have suffered and *they* intended it to happen, therefore it is their fault. Writing as a white man, I see my words about stereotyping to be important for my own self-reflection, learning and repentance, demonstrated in changed behaviours and in challenging others who look like me in the stereotypes they hold that are operational in Irish culture, tacitly and explicitly.

When we get caught up in the negative circle of blame it becomes too easy to separate into in-groups and out-groups and to believe then that everything that benefits them harms us and vice versa. This has the effect of reinforcing negative group identity and loyalty because any attempt to justify 'their' actions or criticize 'our' behaviour is seen as treasonous. In such situations, empathy for the 'other' is impossible and dialogue with them is dangerous. Violence against them

becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; their perceived antipathy towards us makes hostility towards them permissible and sometimes even desirable in order to maintain or establish the status quo.

It is significant that in this narrative attempt to address the stereotypes of Moabites the audience is not asked to change their minds about a whole people group. Instead they are asked to consider the possibility of one good, loyal, hard-working Moabite woman. Boaz thus draws attention to her loyalty and care for Naomi, and witnesses to the public knowledge of her good character (2.11–12; 3.10–11). The women of the town attest to something similar (4.15). Most intriguingly of all perhaps, even Boaz's land manager, who can't get beyond the racial stereotype and who on one occasion calls her 'Ruth the Moabite from Moab' (2.6), must confess that she is polite and hard-working (2.7). It is clear that although in the first two chapters Ruth is rarely mentioned without reference to her ethnicity, the people of Bethlehem are having to redraw their general idea of Moabites. By her actions, the window into her people changes. That she had to 'prove' her virtue is a complex burden, one that will be explored later.

The final evidence that the stereotypes have been undermined and a new understanding of community created is the inclusion of the family line of Perez at the very end of the book (4.18–22). While the stated purpose of Boaz's intended marriage to Ruth was to preserve the family line of Mahlon (Ruth's deceased first husband), and through him the memory of Elimelech (4.5), the final list of names attached at the end of the text makes no mention of Mahlon at all, though Boaz is included. Perhaps more significantly still, we must reckon with the uncomfortable fact that the future great King David has a Moabite in his bloodline. Relationships have been so redrawn and extended that they include a foreigner even in the royal line.

Conclusion

The book of Ruth is so much more than consolation after the book of Judges, and not simply a quaint love story. It is in fact a sophisticated work of inter-cultural awareness. It displays a complex understanding of how in certain circumstances there is no such thing as the past, rather there is a history that continues to play itself out in our present unless we make a conscious effort to address the pain and trauma that we experienced and have caused. Thus Ireland needs to unpick and understand its persistent preoccupation with Britain (England in particular), and recognize an interdependence. And Britain must come to terms with its colonial past and resist its imagined victimhood at the hands of the European Union. If these islands are to move to anything resembling a healthy future, we must deal urgently with our living history and stop pretending that it is our past.

The book of Ruth is also a radical theological act. It recognizes that the national stereotype of Moabites is overcome by a new story; indeed, it is an acknowledgement that new stories are always possible. And these new stories are not told on the level of nation states or whole people groups but through personal and human encounter. In this way the book demonstrates the enduring and transforming power of incarnation.

Sawubona is a common greeting in Zulu. It can be translated as 'I see you; you are valued by me, and I acknowledge your full humanity'. The traditional response is *Shiboka* which means 'I exist for you'. At the root of so much of our

conflict and disagreement is our inability, or our refusal, to genuinely see and take note of the full humanity of another person. In this Zulu greeting and response the full humanity of the individual is acknowledged in all their virtues and their flaws. The Benedictines have a practice that is somewhat similar. The monastic bow by which a monk greets another person is an acknowledgement of the humanity of that person as one in whom the image of God dwells. It also orientates the monk's head to the earth, thereby grounding them and helping them recognize that the person they now welcome shares the same place and the same feet of clay. Only such radical generosity can overcome our destructive stereotypes and prejudices and create new possibilities for relationship, and in these new relationships, new nation-making in our policies and practices towards each other.